

The last man takes LSD: Foucault and the end of revolution

Mitchell Dean and Daniel Zamora

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Michel Foucault died nearly 40 years ago, but his work has exerted and continues to exert a major influence on historians of the human sciences. His work has also incited considerable controversy over the years—and, in recent years, such controversy has turned to the social and political implications of his work, including issues pertinent to equality and inequality and to the influence of the prevailing economic arrangements on people's lives.

In their recent book, Mitchell Dean and Daniel Zamora directly address such issues in a critical assessment of Foucault's work. Both understand Foucault's work and its trajectory quite well—Dean, for example, has written extensively utilizing Foucault's approach to governmentality—and their book represents an essential contribution to the ongoing discussion of the significance of Foucault's work. To be sure, some readers of Foucault may be distressed by the critical stance taken by Dean and Zamora toward Foucault and his work, but their critique needs to be reckoned with. Instructively, while their book represents a useful attempt to discern coherence and continuity regarding various themes elaborated in Foucault's work—seeing his work as more than a discontinuous series of abrupt shifts and ruptures—they are highly critical of the direction that his work took from the mid-1970s on. Accordingly, they suggest that in the aftermath of his transformative experience taking lysergic acid diethylamide (LSD) in a Southern California desert in 1975, Foucault shifted from radically problematizing the “subject,” proclaiming its erasure—or, at least, construing it as the passive recipient of power—to coming to emphasize the active subject and its self-transformation. Thus, in Foucault's *The Use of Pleasure* and his *The Care of Self* (published in French in 1984 as volumes two and three of his *The History of Sexuality*), Foucault explored how the denizens of the ancient Greco-Roman world were primarily concerned, not with expressing a deep sense of selfhood, but with self-invention and stylization in their attempt to elaborate an “aesthetics of existence.” Although Foucault did not recommend returning to the practices of the ancients, he did seem to believe that these practices could provide an example for his contemporaries, encouraging them to experiment with modes of selfhood and living. This would help them to transcend forms of normalized subjectivity fostered by the human sciences and the twentieth-century welfare state. (Foucault labeled this oppressive process of subject formation “subjectification” [*assujettissement*] and argued that as it normalized and disciplined the subject, it subjugated it, denying it autonomy.) Foucault proposed that individuals pursue experimentation with self-invention outside of political, governmental, and other institutional contexts to develop an autonomous sense of subjectivity. According to Dean and Zamora, this led Foucault to stress a kind of lifestyle radicalism and to distrust the state and conventional political measures aimed at dealing with such issues as social welfare, economic inequality, and state regulation more generally.

Perhaps, the key issue that Dean and Zamora deal with is Foucault's relationship to neoliberalism. They demonstrate in a convincing manner Foucault's intellectual affinity with neoliberal perspectives, particularly in the lecture series that he gave at the Collège de France in 1979 (published posthumously as *The Birth of Biopolitics* in the early 2000s). For Foucault, the market-oriented economic formulations elaborated by the German

"Ordoliberals" (Walter Eucken, Franz Böhm, Wilhelm Röpke, and others), on the one hand, and the American "anarcho-liberals" (Gary Becker, Milton Friedman, et al.), on the other, offered a way out of the "dependency" and the normalized and disciplined subjectivity promulgated by the modern welfare state; these formulations thus seemed to offer a route toward the self-invention and autonomy that he so valorized. Foucault was especially intrigued by Becker's notion of "human capital"—which was closely associated with the suggestion that the individual becomes an "entrepreneur" of herself—as well as Becker's proposal to conceive of criminal activity in economic terms. Thus, for Becker, managing crime should not be a matter of constructing the "criminal" as a deviant subject, but of fostering economic and social disincentives for criminal activities. Foucault was also interested in Milton Friedman's proposal for a "negative income tax"; such a system, Foucault believed, would avoid the apparatus of the welfare state and its subjectification of the welfare recipient while guaranteeing a minimal standard of living for all citizens.

Dean and Zamora convincingly demonstrate how certain political stances taken by Foucault, as well as various of his personal "experiments," were congruent with neoliberal policies and culture. During the 1970s, Foucault came to support the Second Left, the faction of the French Socialist Party led by Michel Rocard and supported by such prominent intellectuals as Pierre Rosanvallon. Similar in significant ways to the "Third Way" policies advocated by Anglo-American politicians such as Tony Blair and Bill Clinton, the Second Left eschewed the statist positions ("big government," per Clinton) that had been taken by the French Communist and Socialist parties (as well as by the New Deal Democrats in the United States, it would seem); instead, the Second Left advocated market-friendly, civil society-oriented policies, along with an emphasis on individual entrepreneurship. Moreover, in Foucault's quest for "limit experiences," for example, in his experimentation with LSD, S/M practices within the gay clubs of San Francisco and New York City, and his interest in Zen, Foucault also demonstrated his attraction to the emerging neoliberal culture of the 1970s (even if such practices, to a great extent, were based on those of the 1960s counterculture).

After decades of the implementation of neoliberal policies, it is now obvious that these policies have been disastrous. They have resulted, especially in the United States and the United Kingdom, in rampant economic and social inequality, unemployment, deindustrialization, and a series of economic crises, as well as the neglect of serious attempts to deal with climate chaos. Moreover, while the proposal advanced by some neoliberal economists for a negative income tax has made little headway, welfare "reforms" inspired by neoliberal perspectives have not jettisoned modes of "pastoral power" and subjectification fostered by the modern welfare state, as Foucault had hoped. Rather, reformed welfare programs have come to rely on new and even harsher modes of discipline and governmentality, subjecting welfare recipients to humiliating and punishing ordeals and tests and to such programs as "workfare," seemingly aimed at the creation of "responsible" and "entrepreneurial" subjects.

As important as Dean and Zamora's contribution is, their book should not be taken as somehow the last word on the critical evaluation of Foucault and his work (if it is even meaningful to suggest that there can be such a book). While not unappreciative of some of the more positive aspects of Foucault's work, their assessment of his work tends to be, for the most part, critical in the negative sense. We might ask for a more recuperative and balanced approach—one that would elaborate on how Foucault's formulations, such as governmentality, biopower, knowledge/power, and discipline could be utilized as tools for the critical understanding of our present, our current condition and its problems, within a genealogical historical perspective, as Foucault attempted to do for his era as he pursued his project of the "history of the present." Certainly, Dean and Zamora suggest from time to time the continuing relevance of some of Foucault's formulations, but the two don't go as far in this direction as we might desire. Along such lines, Dean and Zamora justifiably criticize Foucault for his inadequate and often reductive approach to the political, but their own perspective on the political, especially in its democratic form, could usefully be elaborated in more depth and detail. Moreover, while Dean and Zamora insightfully deal with how Foucault's stress on self-transformation tends to occlude the political, they might have considered how self-experimentation and stylization could take on wider political significance. After all, those of us involved in university education know that our students tend to concern themselves with self-transformation in an array of dimensions—sexuality

and sexual orientation, gender identification, philosophical and religious belief, and social and political orientations—often pursued simultaneously; for them, it would seem, “the personal is the political,” as second-wave feminists used to say.

In any event, Dean and Zamora's book performs an important service by exploring the social and political contextualization of Foucault's work. In doing so, they make us aware of its very real limitations, if not altogether of its ongoing potential for critique. Certainly, we need to understand that our present is very different from Foucault's.

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